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MALAYSIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS INTIMIDATION AND ARREST OF EAST TIMOR CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

Amnesty International today condemned the intimidation and threats of mob violence that forced the abandonment of the second Asia Pacific Conference on East Timor (APCET II) held in Kuala Lumpur last Saturday.

Fifty-eight local participants were arrested at the conference for "refusal to disperse" under legislation that carries with it a penalty of up to one year's imprisonment.

"It is appalling that the authorities stood back as alleged members of the ruling coalition's youth wing forcefully broke up the conference in order to prevent the discussion of the human rights situation in East Timor," Amnesty International said today.

"The arrests of the 58 participants is another example of restrictive legislation being used to intimidate and deter Malaysians seeking to express dissenting views -- this action bodes ill for the free expression of political opinion in Malaysia."

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the 18 Malaysians remaining in police custody. Forty-eight foreign participants were detained at the same time and subsequently all deported. Amnesty International is concerned that some of the detainees appear to have been denied access to lawyers while in custody.

Conference participants described a tense situation with a potential for serious violence as more than 100 alleged youth members of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) ruling coalition were allowed, without police intervention, to storm the conference room, to harangue and jostle the participants, and to overturn chairs and rip down banners and curtains.

Suspicions that the authorities had sanctioned the attack were strengthened by reports that police did not intervene until more than an hour after the protestors had stormed the conference room. Only later were seven alleged UMNO youth members finally arrested for "failing to disperse" after being ordered to do so; the 58 local participants were later arrested despite the fact that they had not refused to disperse.

Although the government had earlier made clear its opposition to APCET on the grounds that it might damage Malaysian-Indonesian relations, the conference organizers say the meeting constituted a legal gathering because it was by invitation only and not held in public.

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Amnesty International is also gravely concerned that eight Indonesians and one East Timorese attending the conference were deported to Indonesia yesterday, despite fears being expressed that the group risked interrogation and possibly arrest on their return. In the event one East Timorese currently resident in Australia, and at least one Indonesian were immediately taken into custody by Indonesian police after their arrival at Jakarta's airport. They were released without charge after four hours of questioning.

Amnesty International is concerned that, despite the release of the two, all nine could face further repercussions for their participation in the conference. Indonesia has a history of prosecuting individuals for allegedly criticising the Indonesian Government while overseas, or providing information to groups or individuals outside the country.

"Any action by the Indonesian authorities against the group can only be interpreted as an attempt to prevent Indonesians and East Timorese from engaging in peaceful activities to raise concern about human rights violations in East Timor," Amnesty International said.

The actions of the Malaysian authorities in banning the conference, arresting the participants and deporting the foreign participants follow indications that other regional governments are prepared to limit public criticism of human rights violations in East Timor.

Last month, the Philippine Government announced that it would ban East Timorese resistance leader, and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Jose Ramos Horta, from attending a conference in Manila during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) governmental meetings in the Philippine capital in November.

The Australian Government has stated that it will not protest to the Malaysian Government over the detention of 10 Australians attending the East Timor conference in Kuala Lumpur on the grounds that the 10 knew the conference had been declared illegal by the Malaysian authorities.

"The Australian Government's failure to condemn the arrests sends a clear signal that it is acceptable to detain individuals engaging in peaceful political and human rights activities," Amnesty International said.

"This acquiescence allows for governments to continue committing human rights violations -- including detention of peaceful political and human rights activists -- knowing that they will not be condemned even by states whose citizens are the victims of such violations."

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